



# How to support senior leaders to commit to youth voice

Proudly supporting youth social action

#iwill



Department for Culture, Media & Sport



COMMUNITY FUND



THE CENTRE FOR YOUTH VOICE

Part of YMCA George Williams College

## Introduction

This guidance gives practical steps you can take to engage senior leaders and ensure they commit to youth voice activities.

The guide offers practical guidance should you be:

- Seeking to embed a culture of participation;
- Approaching Senior Leaders in your organisation; or
- Facing challenges in getting Senior Leaders to commit to youth voice.

This guide is best used by staff or volunteers in organisations who want to support senior leaders to share their strong commitment to youth voice. It may also provide useful advice to anyone trying to build support for young people to be heard in decisions which affect them.

This guide is split into four sections. Each section is a distinct point along the journey of engaging senior leaders to commit to youth voice work. The guide provides advice and practical tools you can implement within your practice.

Following this guidance and adapting it to your context should help you to:

- More easily connect with senior leaders;
- Support advocacy for youth voice activity; and
- Build a compelling and effective case for youth inclusion.

## Why this is important for effective youth voice activities

Youth voice activities support young people to form and express their views and to share those views to create positive change in their lives and for others in their community. Often, young people must persuade decision-makers to change current policies, behaviours, or approaches.

Evidence from the #iwill Fund 'Evaluating Youth Voice' research project showed that organisations need to have buy-in at all levels to be open to hearing what young people are saying, be prepared to act on it, and have the processes to support this. Without this whole organisational commitment, staff may support young people to be heard, but organisational processes can prevent young people from influencing decision-making.

## Benefits of gaining senior leader commitment

**Setting the tone from the top:** senior leaders are pivotal in driving an organisational culture change. They set the tone, shape values, and influence behaviours within and beyond the organisation. Demonstrating a visible commitment to youth voice can inspire and motivate employees to embrace change and align with the new culture.

**Influencing organisational practices:** senior leaders drive the development and implementation of policies and ways of working which can include young people's perspectives as 'business as usual'. It can embed youth voice ensuring it is baked in not bolted on.



**Building trust and credibility more widely:** when senior leaders actively promote listening to others, their team may feel more likely to be heard, valued, and supported.

**Demonstrating commitment and wider expectations:** when senior leaders support youth voice, sharing the organisation's commitment with others is easier.



## Who are senior leaders?

A senior leader is any individual who holds a position of authority and influence within your organisation. They typically occupy top-level positions on the leadership team, driving the strategic direction and decision-making of the organisation. Depending on the size of the organisation, it includes those employed by the organisation, such as the CEO and Directors, or those on the Board involved in Governance i.e. Trustees or Directors.

## Don't bolt it on, bake it in

Young people have a right to be involved in all decisions which affect them. This is both within the organisation that works with them, from its strategy to its operational delivery to their personal involvement and experience, and the community and wider society that we share.

Organisations that neglect young people or have a predominantly negative perception of the value their views and insights can offer are less likely to invest in youth voice activities or change in response to what young people say. To ensure young people's right to be heard is fulfilled, we often need to build a widespread agreement that achieving the organisation's vision and mission requires us to capture and respond to the unique insights that young people give. The whole organisational culture needs to be inclusive of young people: collective ways of thinking, behaving, interacting with young people, and appreciating the importance of hearing their views. By changing the underlying values and norms, we can influence how the whole team's attitudes, behaviours, and decisions are tilted to include young people in decisions.

While an organisation may have an overarching culture that broadly defines how things should be done and what is acceptable, sub-cultures can emerge in specific teams or functions. Similarly, culture is inevitably experienced and interpreted subjectively by individuals, depending on who they are, their beliefs, and their perspective on the organisation. Some departments or teams of your organisation may be more, or less, inclined to listen to young people. You may need to consider where there are cases of specific support and resistance.

There are going to be internal and external pressures that will impact your ability to affect cultural change. Navigate your advocacy depending on the drivers in your organisation.

Internal Pressures	External Pressures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal perceptions people may have about the importance of youth voice</li> <li>• Level of exposure people have to youth voice work</li> <li>• Lack of understanding of youth voice work.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wider political agenda</li> <li>• Funding and existing funder commitments</li> <li>• Partnerships with other organisations – is this accepted practice or the norm?</li> <li>• Access to resources.</li> </ul>

Jane is a new youth worker at a community development organisation. She has been hired to deliver a three-year youth social action project. The project will allow young people to lead their own community projects. Jane has a dedicated budget for a youth advisory group but the focus is only on that project. At this stage, there is no other youth engagement across the organisation. When she raised this, she was told that the focus should be on “the youth stuff”. Jane really wants to use the project as a chance to embed youth voice across the whole organisation.



### Prepare to engage

Senior leaders have numerous significant requests on their time and are trying to balance multiple competing priorities for change in the organisation. When engaging senior leaders, ensure you are prepared and able to display your expertise, knowledge, and commitment to building change with them.

**Build the bigger picture:** to advocate effectively about the importance of youth voice work, you will need to understand the benefits of youth voice activities. Start by researching and building a case for the importance of this work and how it will benefit your organisation. Link specifically to your organisation’s strategic aims and values. Highlight the growing expectations in law, from policy makers, or from funders.

**Identify the people you need to speak to:** use your organisation chart to familiarise yourself with people’s roles and identify the right senior leaders, any existing champions of youth voice, or those with responsibility for wider engagement with intended beneficiaries.

**Practice what you preach:** consider your access to young people. Ask them their perspective about being heard in the organisation. What would they like? How are they currently heard? Who is more, and less, likely to be heard? Who is facing barriers to being heard? What decisions would they like more say in? How would they like to be involved? Would they like to share their perspective with others?

**Understand the leader:** gather information about the Senior Leader you will meet with. Learn more about their role, their professional background, and areas of expertise. Use this to tailor your conversation and demonstrate your interest and respect for their work.

**Work with internal allies:** map out known supporters or those who are not supportive. Consider the needs of these different groups. Consider who might be best to build the proposition internally. Are there others in the organisation you can work with to create change?

**Prepare your key points:** organise your thoughts and prepare key talking points. Clearly articulate your ideas, proposals, or questions in advance. If helpful, practice expressing them concisely and confidently to ensure you maximise your time with the Senior Leader.

**Plan the agenda:** write an agenda of what will be discussed and disseminate it beforehand. This should give Senior Leaders an overview of your talking points which may help them prepare for when you meet.

Gethin works as a funder who gives grants to support young people to access the creative industries. He recently heard about participatory grant making, where young people themselves help decide who gets what grants, and wants to pilot this. He raises it with his direct manager who is resistant. Gethin starts to investigate the practice; researching what others are doing and what could be done as a pilot. His manager is impressed by the initial research and together they request a meeting with the CEO. Gethin doesn't know the CEO well so looks into their background and finds out that when younger the CEO was involved in various youth groups and was previously a trustee of another funder who had pioneered this work.



## Seal the deal

You want to maximise the opportunity when you gain access to senior leaders.

**Engage with others' concerns in good faith:** do not assume that concerns are based in principled opposition to listening to young people. senior leaders may have genuine and legitimate concerns about resource or capacity implications. Always consider what might be important and relevant from their perspective and within their working context. Be proactive in considering these issues and be honest about the trade-offs and decisions needed.

**Don't let 'the perfect' be the enemy of 'the good':** all youth voice activities must be ethical practice. There are minimum expectations of practice to ensure it's safe, respectful, and protects young people's dignity. However, some may use fear of acting 'tokenistically' or set the standard of any youth voice activity so high that it prevents any action. Remember that embedding youth voice is a process not an event. Always look for continuing growth where young people are heard but don't let high ambitions for future plans prevent the first step. You will gain useful learning to grow the work by getting started and undertaking even modest activities.

**Celebrate progress:** if your organisation undertakes any youth voice activity, even informally or on a small scale, consider what can be learnt and build on this. Often it is easier for people to build and expand on what is already happening, rather than contemplating taking on or creating something new.

**Make it personal:** consider how the senior leader themselves could engage in the youth voice activity. Would it be beneficial for the young people you work with, the organisation, and the leader themselves to meet with young people directly? Could this be profiled on their or the organisation's social media? What opportunities exist for raising their profile by engaging directly with young people?

**Top tip:** *the way messages are framed and communicated can significantly influence how others perceive, interpret, and respond to the change initiative. Sadly, as a society, we can often be exposed to negative messages about young people's risk, vulnerability or (perceived) inabilities or failures. This can seep into discussing young people. We can counter this by focusing on the unique opportunities for learning, exploration, and growth and the authenticity of hearing their direct experiences. Always consider how you yourself are being 'pro-youth'.*

## In the room

If you get the opportunity to talk with senior leaders, consider appealing to their head, heart, and hands. These are not sequential actions but three interlinked activities in parallel. By paying attention to all three elements, you will be better at advocating for change.





## Head - envision the future and big issues:

- Tell the people in the room what you want them to know;
- Tailor your message to the person/people you are talking to;
- Use evidence to support the benefits and share the impacts of effective youth voice; and
- Show the connection to wider organisational strategies.

## Heart - inspire and connect emotionally:

- Think about the emotion you want them to feel i.e. opportunity, excitement, energy etc. Try to convey this in how you express yourself and the benefits of listening to young people;
- Convey stories of change and the value that youth voice work can bring; and
- Suggest senior leaders make time and see youth voice activities in action so they can understand their benefits and reality first-hand.

## Hand - be practical and show next steps:

- Clearly communicate what they can do for you and what you can offer them;
- Don't push too hard if they aren't ready to commit at this stage; and
- Keep in mind the power the people in the room have and what they have power over.

## What senior leaders can do

When you are working to engage senior leaders to create effective organisational change, you should be aiming for them to:

**Define the change:** we want senior leaders to define the change they want to see. They should clearly communicate their vision of youth inclusion to the entire organisation, the rationale behind the change, the desired outcomes, and how it aligns with the organisation's vision and values. By framing the change as a positive and necessary step towards a better future, leaders can inspire employees and generate support for the change.

**Lead by example:** senior leaders must lead by example and embody the desired change themselves. When employees see senior leaders actively embracing the change, it inspires and motivates them to do the same. That means senior leaders should interact with young people and demonstrate how they have considered the views young people have offered.

**Involve others:** the involvement process should be created with their team and young people themselves. To create a shared sense of ownership and a collaborative culture, everyone should have a role to provide ideas, suggestions, and concerns. Leaders should address any barriers or obstacles that impede progress and support the team as they transition.

**Take first steps:** suggest some initial first steps for senior leaders to undertake to show their commitment to others. Could they shadow an employee who is involved in youth voice work for a day? Could they have an open-door day where any team member can pop by and discuss the intended change? Could they incentivise some cross-team working on a specific project which expands the issues young people are heard on? Could relevant policies and procedures, like expenses and safeguarding, be reviewed to make sure they are fit for purpose for involvement?

**Communicate openly:** the team need regular updates, valid concerns addressed, and questions answered. They need to see progress against milestones.

**Provide support and resources:** they need to unlock the necessary training and resources for relevant team members to have the skills and capabilities required for the new working methods.

Tim is a new CEO of a large regional youth organisation. There have been some ad-hoc youth voice activities but nothing which is embedded or regularly occurring. He intends to grow the youth voice work as part of the strategy process. He asks others in the team to consider opportunities for young people to influence work in the short term more meaningfully and what the organisation can build over the next three years. He talks to a key funder about them extending their support to pay for a new youth participation officer and suggests to the Board Chair that they recruit a young trustee.



## Following up

Culture change often requires incremental and continued progress.

**Follow-up:** after any meetings with Senior Leaders remind them of your focus on youth voice work.

**Keep it up:** keep talking about it and disseminate any new policies or research you find about youth voice with your organisation.

**Top tip:** *creating organisational change can be draining. Take care of yourself by ensuring you engage like-minded members of your team. Make sure you celebrate any progress and highlight this to others. Speak openly with your manager about your experiences. Describe what you are learning from advocating for change and express your feelings when there is resistance to change.*

## Learn More

- Charity Comms provides a guide to **Audience Mapping and Tailoring Your Message** to the people you are speaking to.
- Learn more about the practical ways to portray a positive narrative of including young people by using the Frameworks Institute Strategic Brief **From Risk to Opportunity: Framing Adolescent Development**.
- For more details on why to involve those with lived experience in charities, look at the resources compiled by the **Bayes Business School**.
- If you want to get into the detail on culture change which enables youth voice, read the **Building a Culture of Participation Handbook**.
- Boston Consulting Group's Henderson Institute is a strategy think tank. They have built an evidence base on using the **Head, Heart, Hand approach** to organisational change.
- Learn more about what ethical and effective youth voice activities looks like in practice by reviewing Save the Children's, **The Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Children's Participation**.

## About this guide

This guidance has been produced as part of a project that captured youth voice's impact within the #iwill Fund. During 2021-2023, a Young Evaluators Panel of young people from across England steered the collection and analysis of data on how young people are heard within the #iwill Fund and other youth voice activities. A participatory process allowed other young people, practitioners, funders, policy makers and academics to review their findings. A final report of their findings is available on the Centre for Youth Voice website.

The Centre for Youth Voice team has drafted these guides based on the learning generated through the project, the views of young people engaged in the project and wider good practices. All scenarios are hypothetical composites informed by examples provided by young people, practitioners and the team's experiences. Links are provided to learn more but they do not constitute an endorsement or approval by YMCA George Williams College and we bear no responsibility for its accuracy, legality, or content.

## About the Centre for Youth Voice

At YMCA George Williams College, our vision is for a just and equitable society that invests in support for all young people to learn, grow, and explore their relationships with the world around them. Established in 1970, the College works to provide transformational support to practitioners, funders, and policy makers across the sector, to improve the quality and impact of provision and outcomes for children and young people across the UK. This support is characterised by safe spaces, high quality socio-emotional skill development opportunities, and relationships with trusted adults.

As part of its work, the College hosts three Centres of Expertise. The Centre for Youth Voice at YMCA George Williams College advocates for and supports a stronger role for the voices of young people in evaluation and continuous quality improvement. Underpinned by the belief in participation of young people in the decisions that affect them, the Centre for Youth Voice develops and shares relational, structural, and practical approaches to embedding the voices of young people, and directly supporting them to develop their research and evaluation skills.

## About the #iwill Fund

The #iwill Fund is made possible thanks to £66 million joint investment from The National Lottery Community Fund and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to support young people to access high quality social action opportunities.

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